

# Planning for Graduate School For Alumni

## Making the Decision

Graduate/Professional study requires a significant commitment of time and money, along with rigorous academic demands. Deciding to go to graduate school is a decision that should be made after much research and reflection regarding your goals, strengths, and motivation. Most graduate and professional schools require application materials to be submitted at least 8 to 9 months prior to the beginning of the program, so **START EARLY!**

### **REASONS TO ATTEND**

- Compelling academic, intellectual, or career interest
- Career field of interest requires an advanced degree
- More opportunities for advancement

### **REASONS NOT TO ATTEND**

- Unsure of what to do after completing your bachelor's degree
- Can't find a job or don't feel ready to enter the workforce
- Desire to please parents/professors

## Where to Start

**DO SOME SELF-ASSESSMENT:** Consider your interests, skills, and values and clarify your specific career goals before you begin the process of choosing programs.

**IDENTIFY POTENTIAL SCHOOLS AND PROGRAMS:** Be familiar with the curriculum, program requirements, department reputation, and faculty research interests, as well as current issues in your field. Talk with faculty and alumni for recommendations of programs to consider. Use the following websites to help you gather information:

<http://www.gradschools.com>

<http://www.petersons.com>

<https://www.usnews.com/best-graduate-schools>

<https://www.princetonreview.com/grad-school-search>

**RESEARCH:** Search for programs that match your professional and personal goals.

- Find out where program graduates are working and the types of positions they hold.
- Visit campuses, talk to students & faculty, and attend a class.
- Check program rankings in publications like U.S. News and World Report.
- Look through professional research journals in your chosen academic discipline to see what universities are represented.

**EVALUATING PROGRAMS:** Begin to compare those programs you've found online. Following are some factors to consider when comparing schools and programs:

- Reputation of the school, program, and faculty.
- Location, size, facilities, and housing options.
- Requirements, departmental courses, and program emphasis.
- Application fee and requirements.
- Acceptance rate.
- Costs and financial aid offered; assistantships, fellowships.
- Accreditation of the program.
- Student resources.
- Career placement data.

### Entrance Exams & Applications

Consider taking an exam review class, joining a study group, or purchasing a study guide with sample tests (hard copy or online). We recommend that you take entrance exams early. Please review the graduate school planning timeline. It may take 3-10 weeks to receive official scores, depending on the exam you take.

Applications can be found on each program's website. Follow instructions exactly for each program and realize that each program will most likely have different instructions.

### Essays & Personal Statements

We recommend at least two readers for your personal statements. Many programs will list specific questions you must address in these documents while others may simply ask for a statement or biography. Pay careful attention to page/word limits, and any specific topics you're asked to address in your essay. To help you get started, ask yourself the following questions:

- What is special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life story?
- What details of your life (personal or family problems, history, people or events that have shaped you or influenced your goals) might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
- When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it (and about yourself) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?
- How have you learned about this field—through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?
- How has your work contributed to your growth?
- What are your career goals?

- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain (great grades but mediocre LSAT or GRE scores, for example, or a distinct upward pattern to your GPA if it was only average in the beginning)?
- Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (e.g. economic, familial, or physical hardships)
- What personal characteristics (e.g. integrity, compassion, persistence) do you possess that would improve your chances for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?
- What skills (e.g. leadership, communicative, analytical) do you possess?
- Why might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school—and more successful and effective in the profession or field than other applicants?
- What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?

[Adapted from the OWL at Purdue web site]

### Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendation are typically written by two - four professionals, supervisors, professors, or others who can speak to your ability to do well in graduate school. Keep in mind:

- Always ask the person if they are willing to write a positive and thorough letter of recommendation and do not assume she/he will write it.
- Ask the person at least 6 weeks before the application deadline. Provide your letter writer with a deadline earlier than the due date to allow for extra wiggle room.
- You should provide your references with a copy of your current résumé, a personal statement, stamped and addressed envelopes for each institution if forms are to be mailed, and a set of instructions for each school.
- Some colleges/universities may have a form that your references must fill out and return. If there is a form, be sure to provide this information to your references. Oftentimes, references will complete this process online.
- Be sure to sign forms and fill out student section before giving them to your references.
- Recommendations can be used to your advantage if GPA or exam scores are borderline

## Application Checklist

Consider using an Excel file or another organization method to track and store the following information. It is often helpful for students to arrange this information by the programs' application deadline, alphabetically, or by your program preference.

- INSTITUTION
- PROGRAM TITLE
- APPLICATION DEADLINE
  - a. Application fee
  - b. Online application available
  - c. PIN/Password for online application
- ADMISSION REQUIREMENTS
  - a. Test Scores:
    - i. Admission Exam Required (GRE, GMAT, LSAT, MCAT, etc.)
    - ii. Minimum score required
  - b. GPA Required:
    - i. Minimum/average accepted
  - c. Personal Statement/Essay/Letter of Interest:
    - i. Type of essay
    - ii. Number of pages or words
    - iii. Specific questions that must be answered
  - d. Writing Sample:
    - i. Type(s) (E.g. Creative, Non-fiction, etc.)
  - e. Letters of Recommendation:
    - i. Number required
    - ii. Online or Written
    - iii. Form requiring your signature?
  - f. Resume or Curriculum Vitae required
  - g. Audition tape/portfolio/other materials required
- INFORMATION FOR YOUR RECORDS:
  - a. Address to send transcripts or official application materials (if not online)
  - b. Faculty Members/Research areas of interest
  - c. Assistantship Availability (Teaching, Research, General Appointment, etc.):
    - i. Application deadline for assistantship